# An action research project exploring the psychology curriculum and transitions to employment

Isabella McMurray, Pat Roberts, Ian Robertson & Kevin Teoh

*Within the UK, traditional subject-specific areas are increasingly being complemented by the provision of opportunities to foster students' personal development planning as an aide to support their future employment and lifelong learning. This paper describes an action research project which examined employability skills within a psychology department's curriculum. The first cycle involved conducting a curriculum audit, focus groups and a survey of psychology undergraduates' views on employability. Analysis of the findings suggested a strong focus on development of generic graduate skills, such as communication, IT and working with others, whilst students had difficulty in recognising the applicability of these skills beyond an educational context. Furthermore, examples of explicit career development planning were minimal in both module information documentation and undergraduates' accounts. After a process of evaluation and reflection, the second cycle involved embedding employability skills into the psychology curriculum. The process is described along with discussion on methodological issues and the benefits and challenges of embedding employability in a curriculum.*
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THERE HAVE BEEN a variety of theoretical approaches relating to the way that we conceptualise and structure the higher education curriculum (Smith, 1996, 2000). Universities were set up as institutions of learning: scholarly contexts in the pursuit and transference of knowledge (Boulton & Lucas, 2008). The society in which these institutions find themselves has evolved and continues to evolve in terms of its technological, social and economic climate. As a result Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have adapted by offering, to a more diverse student body, courses of an applied nature (Tynjala, Valimaa & Sarja, 2003). This provides pedagogical challenges for educators who must facilitate students' learning of subject specific knowledge and nurture a complex set of skills and competencies in their students in order for them to become both initiators and developers of economic growth (NCIHE, 1997; Garraway, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2007).

One of the principal aims of psychology departments in the UK is to facilitate undergraduates in gaining an in-depth subject knowledge of psychology following the British Psychological Society (BPS) curriculum guidelines (BPS, 2008) and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2007) benchmark statements. In addition delivering a degree programme provides a student experience that is a seedbed in which students build on their own personal attributes in conjunction with a variety of skills and social practices in order to achieve both fulfilling employment and a desire for lifelong learning. Furthermore, in our institution a teaching and learning review was conducted in 2008 detailing a framework which aimed at providing students with a curriculum that motivated them to develop as autonomous learners and prepare them for life after university. This paper provides an account of an action research project which explored employability skills within the psychology curriculum and details the subsequent changes that were made to our programme of study.

## What is employability, and why is it important?

Traditionally, Humboldt (1810, cited in Boulton & Lucas, 2008) envisaged three distinct features of universities: as places of research, as schools of teaching and as autonomous institutes independent of Government control. However, contemporary higher education has evolved so that now universities are more entwined with the needs of society and the business world (Tynjala et al., 2003) and a strong emphasis is now placed on the applied nature of knowledge and skills. These tangible outcomes can be seen to lead to better prospects for employment. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in the UK produces a yearly graduate first destination survey which measures if graduates are employed six months after leaving university. However, this only provides a snapshot of graduate employment and does not take into account the suitability of the job that the graduate is employed to do, whether the graduate is applying the skills that they learnt whilst at university or whether they have taken a low-level job (Shah, Pell & Brooke, 2004; Pool & Sewell, 2007).

A more holistic notion of employability has been put forward by the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team who defined employability as:

> *'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.'*
> (York, 2004, p.7)

Although it is appreciated that this definition does not take into account outside influences which may impact on the individual and their situation (Yorke, 2004) and how one compares to the rest of the job hunting market (Brown et al., 2003), it does imply that employees may have to adjust their achievements, skills and understandings to suit the changing workforce, community and economy which paves the way for their life-long learning (Brown et al., 2003; Fallows & Steven, 2000; Sleap & Reed, 2006; Yorke, 2004). Indeed, there is a drive in HEIs in the UK to enhance graduate employability; this is evidenced by increased funding within the education sector in this area.

## Employers and the psychology graduate

It is understandable then that, in this knowledge-driven economy, graduates need to have a high level of knowledge and skills that can be adapted to a range of careers and hence that enhance their employability. A variety of research projects have identified a plethora of different skills, practices, competencies and personal attributes that are deemed to contribute to graduate employability. For example, the HEA Psychology Network Employability Guide (Lantz et al., 2008) notes employers' preference for employees who are flexible, can manage change, have self-motivation and drive, have an analytical ability, are good at decision making, have excellent communication, interpersonal skills and the ability to work in a team. In addition they can organise, plan, have the ability to prioritise, are customer-focused and have leadership ability. Others, like Knight and Yorke (2003), find employers prefer graduates with workplace experience, whilst Shah et al. (2004) found teamwork, personal organisation, self-motivation, oral and written communication as well as subject knowledge as being the most important attributes. However, there has been recognition that there is often a mismatch between the types of graduates' skills and the needs of the organisation (Muk-Nglik Wong & Jamil, 2006).

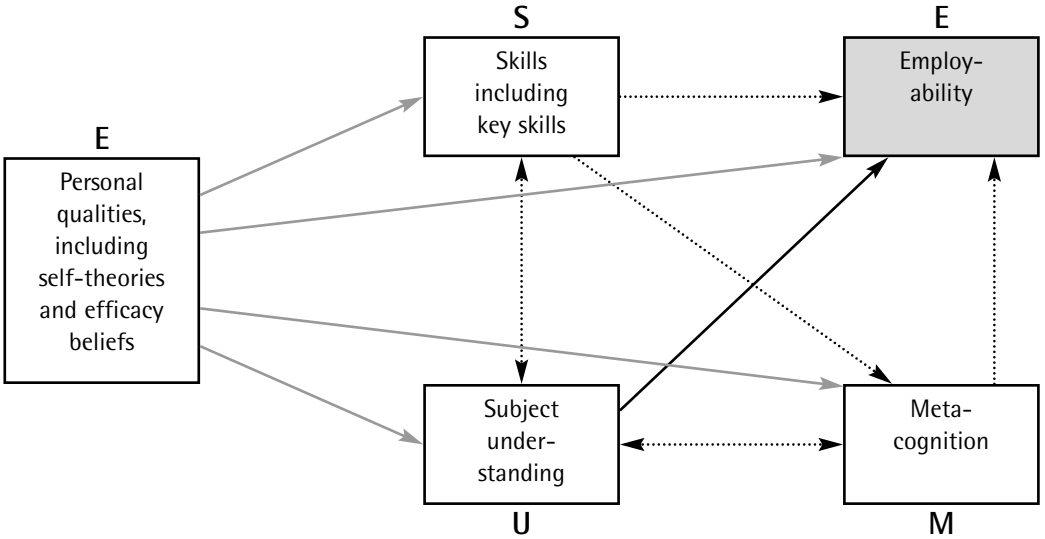
The lists of skills noted above are not exhaustive, and there is coherence within them. Although external drivers emphasise the relevance of these key skills, many academics question the importance of fostering skills in their students, especially at the expense of developing traditional academic subject knowledge, and can also take staff away from their own research interests (Bennett et al., 1999). Furthermore, it has

been argued that checklists where specific skills can be evidenced as taught are not as important as personal attributes and developing professional identities which can take longer to develop (DfES, 2002; Brown et al., 2003; Holmes, 2005).

Where does this leave educators of psychology undergraduates? The UK's widening participation agenda means that more students are entering higher education from a diverse range of backgrounds, bringing with them a wider range of different life experiences. Moreover, when UK psychology students do graduate approximately 80 per cent do not go on to become a psychologist but go on to a variety of different occupations including health and social care, education, commerce and industry (Lantz et al., 2008). This diversity at entry to and exit from university means that students need to acquire some very general skills whilst at university. Indeed, what makes the psychology degree special is that it has its foundations built upon both the humanities and sciences, thereby allowing the student to obtain attributes relevant to both these areas (i.e. critical thinking and essay writing for humanities, numeracy and hypothesis testing in sciences). Not only that, the theoretical knowledge attained by students on how human behaviour works for themselves and others allows the student an opportunity to acquire or improve their generic skills, for example, being cognisant of their own personal and interpersonal skills. To give examples of this, students are taught the theories behind cognitive biases which could influence their critical thinking ability, or learn how group functioning and processes can affect how they work in teams (QAA, 2007).

In order to acquire these various skills, the curriculum has to be designed so that students are able to obtain the skills and knowledge outlined above, and this should be reflected in the learning, teaching and assessment methods. Knight and Yorke's (2003, 2004) USEM developmental model is often used to foster employability. The first letter of this model represents the 'Understanding' of the academic course and subject being taught, together with other relevant knowledge to employability. The second letter stands for 'Skilful' practices in context, or general social practices. 'Efficacy' repre-

**Figure 1: The USEM account of employability (Knight & Yorke, 2003, 2004).**



sents the third letter with the last letter referring to 'Metacognition', or strategic thinking and reflection. Knight and Yorke's (2003, 2004) model is displayed in Figure 1. They maintain that planning a curriculum in this manner should promote a knowledgeable well rounded graduate.

Furthermore, the psychology QAA benchmark statement (2007) advocates a similar approach stating that, as they progress through their degree, along with the acquisition of knowledge, students should develop the ability to critically evaluate theories, approaches, and methods within their field of study.

## The psychology degree at the University of Bedfordshire

The psychology degree at the University of Bedfordshire follows the core BPS (2008) curriculum. The final destinations surveys for the previous three years are shown in Table 1.

From Table 1 it can be seen that, during the time period 2004–2008, approximately half of our psychology graduates progressed to employment, a quarter undertook post graduate study and between 18 per cent and 30 per cent followed other pathways including voluntary work, travelling or were unemployed. As we mentioned above, this snap shot does not directly indicate what skills we need to support in our curriculum. However, it is one among other drivers that highlighted the need for the psychology department to evaluate what skills were actually being developed within the curriculum in order to support our graduates' future employment.

As part of the quality assurance procedure within the university there was a mandatory requirement for all Module Information Forms (ModInfs) to detail the key skills that each particular module aimed to develop. These skills were drawn from the QCA Key Skill Descriptors (see QCA website) and then formed part of the learning outcomes for that particular module.

Consequently, there was an assumption that the skills and competencies delivered via the psychology curricula would continue to be cultivated throughout the degree and would eventually be beneficial when the students commenced full-time graduate employment. However, the extent to which this occurs as perceived by students undertaking the degree, our graduates and companies that employ our graduates had not been previously investigated.

We therefore decided to use an action research approach to explore employability skills within the psychology curriculum and then to use these findings to develop and implement a revised curriculum. Traditional educational models of action research encourage teachers to examine and reflect on their own teaching practice (Stenhouse, 1975). The focus of this paper describes an action research project which broadly aligns to participatory action research approaches (Norton, 2009): that is, it examines aspects of the curriculum design of the whole

**Table 1: Psychology Department Final Destination Surveys 2004–2008.**

| Year | Employed | Postgraduate study | Other |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2004–2005 | 53% | 26% | 21% |
| 2005–2006 | 56% | 26% | 18% |
| 2006–2007 | 46.5% | 25% | 28.5% |
| 2007–2008 | 44% | 30% | 26% |

(Source: Careers and Employment Service, University of Bedfordshire 2010)

psychology department, along with the perspectives of those who would ultimately benefit from this teaching: the students. Graduates and graduate employers were also interviewed within the broader project but are not discussed within this paper. Action research aims at changing three things: 'practitioners' practices, understandings of practices and the conditions in which they practice' (Kemmis, 2009, p.464). Therefore, action research was chosen to explore our working practice within the constraints of a BPS curriculum. To this end the whole department was engaged in the process as previous research has shown that using external researchers makes it more difficult to induce curriculum change (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996, cited in Burchell, 2000).

## Research questions

***Cycle 1***

1. What skills are documented in the psychology department quality assurance modular information forms?
2. What are students' perceptions of the employability skills they are developing within the curriculum?

***Cycle 2***

3. How does the curriculum need to be amended to support the employability of psychology graduates, following the outcomes of Cycle 1?

## Methodology

This action research project incorporated two cycles. Cycle 1 reviewed the situation at the beginning of the project which included an audit, survey and a focus group to gain baseline information. During Cycle 2 these findings were analysed followed by a process of reflection, planning and implementing changes to the curriculum.

When conducting an action research study for curriculum development there are varying practical, financial and time constraints which may have an impact upon when the research is undertaken (Burchell, 2000). For this project some of the data collection methods were conducted simultaneously; however, they were all undertaken within the same academic year 2007–2008. This was followed by a period of reflection and planning during the summer of 2008 so that the revised curriculum was delivered from the autumn of 2009. As previously mentioned, the institution's revised teaching and learning review (2008) provided the opportunity for the department to restructure the undergraduate curriculum with a stronger emphasis on enhancing graduates' employability. This provided the department with the opportunity to review the curriculum as a whole and document the revised modules on to new Unit Information Forms (UIFs). Within this new framework there was the requirement to move from 15 credit modules to 30 credit units.

***Methods used in Cycle 1***

*Curriculum audit*

The curriculum audit consisted of reviewing the psychology department module information (ModInf) forms. These forms were the quality assurance documents used within the university and formed the basis of our module handbooks outlining, amongst other things, the rationale, teaching and learning strategies, the learning outcomes and assessment strategies for that particular module. In addition, all ModInf forms contained QCA Key Skill Descriptors under seven headings: Communication; Improving Own Learning; Information Technology; Application of Number; Problem Solving; Working with Others; and Career Development. Under each of these skills were a variety of subordinate skills. Academic staff chose those that best reflected the sub-skills they believed undergraduates would be developing in that module. So, for example, Communication skills were broken down into written, listening and oral presentation skills, and so on. In total, across the whole curriculum, there were 22 modules (eight at Level 1, eight at Level 2 and five at Level 3 plus the dissertation). The frequency of times each skill was cited in the ModInfs was

mapped onto the seven QCA Key Skill Descriptors. The data were recorded using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

*Undergraduates' views of skills and experiences gained during their studies*

A total of 77 (24 per cent) psychology undergraduates completed a survey detailing the skills they had felt they had developed during their degree, accounting for a quarter of the students registered on the course. In order to capture more detailed student views, students were invited to take part in two focus groups. These focus groups followed a semi-structured schedule which questioned students' reasons for studying psychology and what skills they felt they were developing during their degree. Students who took part in the study were aged between 18 and 50 ($\bar{x}$ age=25 years). The gender, age and ethnicity breakdown, although not purposeful, mirrored the demographics within the department. The survey included the seven QCA Key Skill Descriptors and the accompanying subordinate skills. Within the survey and focus groups, students were asked to identify which skills they felt they had gained during the previous year of study and in which modules they felt that these skills were developed. The focus groups also included questions relating to students' reasons for choosing to study psychology and their time at university, what they felt they were learning and if and how this might support their future study or career.

Guided by the BPS (2006) ethical guidelines, students were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Ethical approval was granted by the Psychology Department Ethics Committee in August 2006.

***Cycle 1 Processes and outcomes***

*Curriculum audit*

The frequency that staff documented a key skill within each ModInf was noted, for example, presentation skills, and allocated to one of the seven QCA Key Skill Descriptors, for example, communication. Table 2 shows the percentage of times that the seven different Key Skill Descriptors were documented at each level. What is apparent is that the psychology department predominantly focused on developing students' 'Communication Skills', followed by 'Problem Solving Skills'. 'Information Technology' and 'Improving Own Learning' featured very much as peripheral skills. What is noteworthy is that 'Career Development' skills were not explicitly represented in the psychology module documents. Informal discussions with colleagues confirmed that there were some links between the department and the university careers service and

**Table 2: Frequency of key skill descriptors by level by staff.**

| Key Skill Descriptors | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Communication | 42% | 48% | 37% |
| Improving Own Learning | 12% | 4% | 8% |
| Information Technology | 10% | 6% | 7% |
| Application of Number | 14% | 15% | 7% |
| Problem Solving | 15% | 10% | 37% |
| Working with Others | 7% | 17% | 4% |
| Career Development | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

local organisations but these teaching sessions were often ad hoc arrangements rather than a co-ordinated operation by the whole department.

The audit also showed that, as students progressed through the levels, higher order skills were more prominent. For example, in the first year there was more evidence of descriptive work, whilst in the third year there was evidence of critical evaluation in the modular information sheets. These findings provide some support for the QAA (2007) guidelines and the USEM model (Knight & York, 2003, 2004).

*Undergraduates' views of skills and experiences gained during their studies*

Students were given the option of acknowledging that they had developed a particular skill in more than one module, hence multiple responses were given by students. The findings from the survey showed that Level 1 students gave a total of 709 responses to the different skills they felt they had developed in each module. For Level 2, students responded a total of 945 times and Level 3 students responded 388 times. The frequency counts of responses to each skill were converted to a percentage of the total responses for that level. The findings showed that students felt that they had many opportunities to develop their communication skills with the highest percentage across all levels. 'Improving Own Learning' increased at Level 3, this may be due to the opportunities to develop these skills in the research dissertation module. 'Information Technology' and 'Application of Number' remained consistent across the levels showing only a a slight increase at Level 2. 'Problem Solving Skills' were at the highest at Level 3, with a slight dip in Level 2. This is in contrast with 'Working with Others', where the responses were highest at Level 2 compared to the other levels. Students did note that they had the opportunity to develop their career skills at all three levels.

The data from the focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were read line by line by two of the research team and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke,2006). A grounded theoretical approach was adopted (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2007). Rather than have predetermined categories, the researchers questioned, 'What are the participants trying to convey.' A number of open codes were identified, and then merged to arrive at three predominant themes: Subject breadth and adaptability, Personality and career choice, and Subject specific skills.

*Subject breadth and adaptability*

Undergraduates suggested that studying a psychology degree offered them both a breadth of choices of interesting subjects along with adaptability in the job market. These choices meant that students did not need to specifically choose a career pathway at the beginning of their degree but would have more options when they had graduated. Furthermore, the generic skills they were learning throughout their degree would offer them a foundation for many different career trajectories.

> *'I chose a psychology degree because I think I wanted to have a wide range of different topics to choose from, as much as I had a choice I wanted to explore all of them before making a decision.'*
>
> Female 1

*Personality and career choice*

Students also indicated that having a personal aptitude towards helping others directed them to the subject of psychology and subsequent career choices.

> *'Yes I definitively, want to, hopefully become a counsellor, I worked as a manager in a restaurant for several years and part of that is obviously HR and you have to deal with staff's problems and I actually found that: (a) I enjoyed doing it; and that (b) I was quite good at it. I got a lot of positive feedback from my team members how I've helped them.'*
>
> Female 2

*Subject specific skills*

Not all students discussed a career orientation, indicating that they were studying psychology because of their interest in the subject. These students felt that thinking about future careers was somewhat premature in the early stages of their degree programme. Level 1 was perceived as being the time to focus solely on gaining a foundation of subject knowledge rather than gaining skills that could be used within and beyond university. For example, developing skills such as, writing a research report was viewed as essential within an academic context but not recognised as being applicable to the working world.

***Reflections and planning***

Reflecting specifically upon the aims of this project, it was evident that on the whole our documented curriculum mirrored the skills that students felt they were developing. That is, there was consistency between the curriculum audit findings and the students' perceptions of what skills they felt they had gained during their psychology degree with communication skills having the highest percentages in relation to all skills at each of the levels.

There was some incongruence between students' perception of the skills relating to both improving their own learning and the development of their IT skills compared with the QA official documentation. That is, students reported having the opportunity to develop these skills in all modules to a greater extent than was officially documented. In contrast, 'Application of Number' was perceived as being less developed by students compared to the provision that staff felt they were offering. The curriculum audit did indicate that career skills were not detailed explicitly in any of the modular information specifications. Nevertheless, students did respond that they were developing listening skills during the counselling modules which would be essential if they went on to become counsellors.

The breadth of psychology as a subject was applauded by students in relation to the adaptability it provided in their career choice. These findings reflect the current drive for adaptability to be built into employees' training skills (Lauder, 2001). Van Laar's (2008) seven-year longitudinal study for the BPS exploring career destinations of graduates who completed their degree in the year 2000 concluded in an oral presentation of the findings that 'just about every job suitable for a general graduate will be done best by a psychologist!'

We asked ourselves, how could these findings improve our graduates' future employability? As educators we are aware of the priority to ensure that there is a constructive alignment between the learning outcomes of the teaching session and the learning activities that we ask students to engage in (Biggs, 1996). Therefore, it is important that the documented aims of each module are delivered to the students and that undergraduates are aware of the learning outcomes of the unit. Through planning realistic and meaningful teaching sessions the aim is that students are more likely to internalise the knowledge and skills for future use.

The Department of Psychology and the institution as a whole has a history of commitment to the student experience and students' personal development planning (PDP). Therefore, it was customary teaching practice for staff within the department to meet to discuss, reflect and amend teaching and learning practices. As part of the teaching and learning review (2008) ModInfs were rewritten as Unit Information Forms (UIFs) which included a requirement to detail the actions to be taken to strengthen student employability skills. Staff within the department worked collaboratively with the Careers and Employment Service (CES), the Learning Resources Centre (LRC) representatives and from the University Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) on how best this could be achieved in order to facilitate the teaching sessions.

Previous methods to enhance employability within the university have included teaching PDP as a standalone 'bolt-on' module within the curriculum, a stand alone 'bolt-on' career development module, or as separate tutorials aligned to a core module. There are advantages and disadvantages of each of these methods. However, Harvey and Drew (2006) noted that developing learning skills was best addressed when the learning was contextualised within the curriculum rather than in standalone courses. Previous measures within the department to support career development specifically have included working closely with the university CES who had delivered departmental induction talks and lectures in the final year. These sessions have been arranged independently by staff. Moreover, all students were invited to employer-led conferences and were offered assistance with job applications given by the CES. However, the results of our study demonstrated some disparities between our Quality Assurance documents (ModInfs) and our teaching practice. Furthermore, an integrated approach of career development across the whole curriculum was required that would involve module tutors, and careers staff to assist in developing skills and the students would require for future employment or postgraduate study.

***Cycle 2 – Process and outcomes***

*Embedding employability into the curriculum*

The findings of the first cycle showed that there was a range of traditional graduate skills being promoted within the psychology programme. Nevertheless, it was apparent that the some aspects of the curriculum needed to be amended so that there was a clear development of skills over the life course of the degree with an injection of career development focus in the curriculum. Using the psychology QAA (2007) benchmark statement, the USEM model, the findings from this study and discussions with colleagues, the authors created and implemented a Skills Development Plan across the curriculum. These guidelines stated the explicit skills that we expected psychology students to develop at each academic level. For example, at Level 1 there was an emphasis is on students' gaining an understanding of psychological theories and communicating this knowledge through a descriptive essay. At Level 2, students were expected to communicate both a breadth and depth of psychological knowledge within a written essay. By Level 3, students would demonstrate, through academic writing, a more sophisticated critical evaluation of psychological theories. Of course, the skills guidelines involved additional aspects of communication, such as communicating verbally and working in groups.

The skills listed in the developmental plan were then incorporated into the different documents and in partnership with our colleagues from the careers service and the psychology librarian, new teaching sessions were agreed, as shown in Table 3.

In parallel to the implicit employability skills that are currently being developed with the curriculum, Table 3 above shows how input from our LRC and CES has been embedded within the revised curriculum. For example, at Levels 1 and 2, students used workbooks, written by the psychology librarian with support from the psychology lecturer in that unit in order to support students in researching the most appropriate and effective sources of evidence, such as journal articles and web pages. Towards the end of Level 2, students were asked to consider what information literacy skills they have which can aid them with planning their dissertations and have the chance to demonstrate these.

In terms of teaching sessions run by or in conjunction with the CES, at Level 1 students are asked to reflect upon their pre university life and think about what skills they brought to university and which life events have had a significant impact upon who and where they are now. Students were also encouraged to visualise how these previous skills or life events might support their cur-

**Table 3: Embedding employability into the psychology curriculum.**

| | Unit Name | Activity |
|---|---|---|
| **Level 1** | Introduction to Research Methods and Analysis | Researching your personal, academic and career management skills lecture and tutorial |
| | Interpersonal Psychology: Theory and Practice | Career choice and tutorial |
| | | Action planning and goal setting |
| | Foundations to Psychology | Information literacy workbooks |
| **Level 2** | Social Processes and Life Span Development | Development of academic and professional identity |
| | | Lecture on career options with psychology |
| | Biological and Cognitive Psychology | Professional communication and tutorial |
| | Psychology of Individual Differences | Personality and career choice |
| | Research Methods | Planning your dissertation, links to career choice |
| **Level 3** | Research Dissertation | Planning life beyond university |
| | Occupational Psychology | Workshops on CVs and interview skills |
| | | Assessments Centre Day (Optional) |

rent and future academic and professional selves. In another session students were expected to appraise their own strengths and areas for development and create specific personal, professional and career action plans and goals. These were recorded alongside a realistic timeline and details of what challenges might make these goals difficult to obtain. Previous research has shown that students who have a well-developed concept of their career goals and a realistic understanding of their own abilities and aptitudes have higher levels of employability than other students (Eby et al., 2003).

Students in the focus groups felt that there was a strong link between their own personality and the career choices that they made. The revised curriculum gave students the chance to explore the relationship further in the Level 2 unit entitled 'Psychology of Individual Differences', as well as covering, amongst other things, theoretical explanations of the individual differences of personality and intelligence and the use of psychometric testing. The revised unit now incorporates an overview of how psychometric testing and competency measures are applied in the working context. Indeed, the use of these measures in graduate selection has grown over the past few years, with 53.9 per cent of organisations using this method as a selection criterion (IRS, 2003). Students also discuss which personality traits they think are associated with career success in terms of higher salaries and job satisfaction. Rode et al. (2008) found that personality traits such as extroversion and agreeableness are the strongest predictors of salary and that emotional stability and a proactive personality predict perceived job success.

The 'Social Processes and Life Span Development' unit encourages students to think about traditional psychological theories and how these work in harmony with theoretical frameworks that underpin career theories within a lecture and a tutorial session. For example, Erikson (1968) characterised the adolescent years as a period of

'identity versus role confusion' where it is necessary for young people to experiment with different roles, personalities and behaviours in order to discover what makes them essentially a fixed, unique sense of being. Therefore, it is not unusual that some students may feel undecided about their career choices. Students are also informed of alternative explanations for career indecision, such as a lack of career self-efficacy (an ability to engage in career decision tasks; Nauta, 2007). In order to assimilate this information students have to write a critical appraisal on a related journal article and are required to produce a reflective essay where they have to consider their academic and professional identity. According to Holmes (2005) a professional identity is just as relevant as practical skills in enhancing an individual's employability. Also, within social psychology students are given tasks to work on in teams and write a fortnightly blog for a year of their reflections of their role and experiences of working in groups.

In the cognitive psychology module, time is spent exploring language and how people convey information in conversation. Pitch, pace, tone of voice and the words used in conversation along with body language, posture and appearance all have an impact on others. This can lead to an exercise such as 'The Elevator Pitch' where students have to convey a snap shot of their positive aspects to a potential employer in an elevator in order to leave a lasting impression. Cognitive psychology modules also include employment relevant topics such as reasoning and argument, the impact of heuristics on thinking, techniques of persuasion, creativity and insight and so on. These need to be anchored to real world examples and real world experience so that students are aware of their applicability outside the lecture room.

Finally, a further example is at Level 3 in the Research Dissertation Unit where a particular focus has now been placed on developing interview skills through workshops run by the CES as well as an information dissemination session on the current job market. Assessment Centres are discussed and evaluated within occupational psychology and students are invited (but not currently assessed) to come along and undertake a variety of different assessments with local employers and members of psychology and the CES.

The support provided by the CES was viewed as appropriate by psychology staff as previously there was limited awareness by students of their need for assistance in gaining employment. Moreover, practicing interview skills through role play gives students the chance to present a culmination of skills and experiences. There is little utility in graduates having skills if they are unable to articulate them (Watts, 2006). Embedding employability into the curriculum, therefore, worked in tandem to other bolt on activities that run in the department, such as research informed teaching initiatives.

## Conclusions

This study has provided information for staff when planning a curriculum that encompasses more than academic content and practice. This has been a valuable exercise where we have recognised the traditionally cursory focus on career development within the curriculum and have embedded an explicit student-directed career development focus with the help of our LRC and CES to support the employability of our graduates. There were some limitations to this study. In terms of methodological issues, the skills identified in the curriculum audit, student survey and focus group may have different interpretations for each individual, even though they are defined in quality assurance documentations (QAA, 2007). Indeed, one of the authors found evidence from student evaluation of module questionnaires that students did not always understand what was meant by the various 'transferable skills' (Robertson, 2004). Furthermore, the completion rate of the student survey was not as high as expected (77 students, 24 per cent), on its own only

provided us with a limited insight into the student views. However, in conjunction with the focus groups, the findings did cohere with those of the curriculum audit.

As with any study and intervention, one encounters challenges to the process. These manifested themselves particularly in the process of embedding the development of employability in the curriculum. A recognised concern amongst educators is that they could encounter staff resistance in supporting employability within the curriculum (Bennett et al., 1999). As we were aware of this issue before starting this project, we did not face the same resistance to change that others may have encountered. We found it useful to hold a number of preparatory meetings to discuss how the expertise of the CES and LRC could be utilised to the best advantage within the curriculum. These collaborative meetings, although time consuming, have helped in the transition to a revised curriculum. Psychology staff were supportive to this new initiative, which may in part have been assisted by the institution backing the whole process. Although the programme of study is still in its infancy, feedback from staff embedding career and information literacy skills in their unit is on the whole positive. If this model of delivery was to be adopted by other departments then educators need to consider the resource implications, particularly for CES and LRC staff.

As a department we aim to continue our close working relationship with the CES and LRC to monitor and evaluate the new initiatives embedded within the curriculum. In this ever growing and changing global society it is important for educators to support students' lifelong learning and the skills that underpin it. Furthermore, there is a need to continue to monitor and review the psychology curriculum to identify the ways in which the knowledge and skills it provides continues to enhance students' competencies, helping them in turn to adapt to a changing employment market.

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## The authors

**Isabella McMurray**
Employability Fellow,
Psychology Department,
University of Bedfordshire.

**Pat Roberts**
Senior Lecturer,
Psychology Department,
University of Bedfordshire.

**Ian Robertson**
Head of Department,
Psychology Department,
University of Bedfordshire.

**Kevin Teoh**
Research Assistant,
Psychology Department,
University of Bedfordshire.

## Correspondence

**Isabella McMurray**
Employability Fellow,
Psychology Department,
University of Bedfordshire,
Park Square,
Luton LU1 3JU.
Email: Isabella.mcmurray@beds.ac.uk

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